IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS IN FICTION: A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF THE USE AND EFFECTS OF IDIOMS IN DONNA TARTT’S NOVEL THE SECRET HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

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This study aims to investigate how idioms can be used in fiction and what effects they can have on the reading of fiction as it examines the novel The Secret History by Donna Tartt, from the point of view of a foreign learner of English. The research was done through close reading and textual analysis of the novel. The results suggest that idioms can be used for several different purposes in a text, such as both regarding characters and other situations. The findings also indicate that idioms can contribute to the overall reading of a text as they add richness to its language. In addition, the research points to why idioms can be difficult for second language learners as well as some further problems to take into consideration when dealing with idioms. In conclusion, fiction can be a fruitful source for knowledge about idioms and how they function. Furthermore, the general use of idioms has many potential benefits, but it can also come with certain consequences, such as the risk of not making oneself understood on every occasion.

Key words: idioms, figurative language, textual analysis, Donna Tartt, The Secret History

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1. Introduction

Figurative language is an umbrella term for words and phrases that are used with another meaning than their literal one, in order to create different effects (McArthur, 1998, pp. 230-32). One category in figurative language is idiomatic expressions. David Crystal (1995, p. 163) presents one view on idioms and defines them as having two prime characteristics. First, the meanings of the individual words in the expression cannot be used to understand the meaning of the expression altogether. Second, the expression is also fixed both in terms of its grammar and its lexicality. For example, the words in the expression *raining cats and dogs* cannot be placed in another order, or be changed to synonyms, without losing the idiomaticity in the process.

For native speakers, the ability to discern between the literal meaning and the possible implied meaning behind an expression often seems to happen almost automatically. In contrast, it can prove quite a struggle for non-native speakers since the expressions are language and culture specific. Another problem area lies in the fact that it seems rather difficult to reach a general, more in-depth definition and categorisation of idioms as scholars have debated what kind of expressions that should be covered under the term (Mustonen, 2010, p. 29).

However, idioms are an important part of all languages and our everyday language use. They can be said to add an extra layer in languages as they have a figurative meaning that is often very different from the definition of their individual words that is found in dictionaries and other types of reference material. Furthermore, since the English language has an especially wide range of idiomatic expressions—surveys have estimated at least as many as twenty-five thousand idioms and other fixed expressions (Jackendoff, 1997, p. 157)—it makes research on the topic particularly worthwhile.

What significance do idiomatic expressions have on the reading of a text? This study focuses on the use and effects of idioms in *The Secret History*, a novel written by the American author Donna Tartt, which was first published in 1992. Since then, the novel has gained widespread appeal and became an international bestseller. So far, it has been translated to twenty-four languages. The plot
is set in present-day and tells the story about a group of six classics students at a fictional New England college. Since the language in the book is very rich in terms of figurative language, including idioms (Mustonen, 2010, pp. 7, 48), it seemed suitable for the topic of study.

1.1 Aim

The aim of this study is to investigate how idiomatic expressions are used in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* and what effects they have on the reading of the novel, from the point of view of a second language learner. Therefore, this project is an attempt to get insight as to how idioms can be used for different purposes in a text and what impact they can have on its language.

Moreover, the hypothesis is that gaining knowledge about the usage of idiomatic expressions, for example through fiction, might be beneficial for people's general language use and language learning. One possible reason is that a mastery of idioms often seems to be an important step to reach a native-like proficiency in a given language (Ambrose, n.d, p. 180; Glucksberg, 2001, p. 88).

Two research questions in particular will be addressed in the study. First of all, the focus is on how the idioms themselves are treated in the text. For example, a few points to take into consideration are how many idioms there are, what different kinds of idioms there are and in what contexts the idioms occur. Other areas of interest are how many of the idioms that occur in the actual dialogue in the novel and if any patterns can be found for the characters who use them. Secondly, the core of the study is to examine what effects the usage of idioms has in the book. The aspects that are emphasized are how idioms can influence the language in a text and in what way they contribute to the reading experience.

The second research question is perhaps even more important for the study, although it is dependent on the ability to answer the first research question as well. In order to limit the study, the research is concentrated on idioms and not on any other kind of figurative language, such as metaphors or similes, although they occasionally coincide.
1.2 Method and Material

This study of how idioms are used in Donna Tartt’s novel *The Secret History* is a linguistic research project and it was structured inductively. To be more precise, the topic at hand might essentially be described as stylistic (Leech and Short, 2007, pp. 1-6) and as such, the study combines a linguistic project and a literature project since the research questions can probably be studied by both linguists and literary scholars. Despite this fact, the project attempted to study the questions mainly from a linguistic perspective and highlight what role idioms have in the text. The primary source for the research was the novel itself, *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt. For this reason, however, the study still has an element of literature project as the material was in the form of a novel and the data was analysed in that context as well.

The secondary sources for the project consist of a thesis and several articles, books and websites regarding various aspects of the topic. The thesis (Mustonen, 2010) provided a frame of reference for the method in which to locate idioms in a text. The idea was that this study could be an extension of that previous study since idioms as a topic can be researched from a variety of different perspectives. While Mustonen's (2010) study was concerned with analysing the way that the idioms in the book were translated from English to Finnish, it did not say so much about what effects the use of idioms had on the novel. The present study tried to cover that gap and contextualise what effects idiomatic expressions can have on the reading of a text.

The articles and books that were used for the study provided further information about idioms and how they function. Dictionaries were also used for the study, mostly in the form of online versions compiled by printed publications, which ensured that the idioms were verified and properly defined. For example, The Free Dictionary (2014) is based on the *Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms* and the *Cambridge Dictionary of American Idioms*, which consist of approximately seven thousand and five thousand idiomatic expressions, respectively. Dictionary.com (2014) is partly based on *The American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms* that contains about ten thousand idioms.
This study also has a combination of qualitative and quantitative approach, as it deals both with data that can be analysed in terms of numbers and qualities that cannot actually be measured. The focus is on a qualitative analysis since it seemed more suited for the topic and material. The conclusions in the study were based on the methods of close reading and textual analysis of the novel since they are an established method to approach literature. They were also chosen because of the same reasons as mentioned above. However, this method had the disadvantage of risking that the collection of the data was influenced by subjectivity and intuition, but other options were not available.

To meet the objective of this study, the following procedure was followed: First, the novel was re-read and expressions that seemed to match the description of an idiom were marked. Only different types were counted and not tokens. The expressions were then collected in a document and later evaluated if they were, in fact, idioms. To do so, dictionaries were searched for the selected terms. In this way, the “false” data was sorted out in the process, if it could not be verified there. Also, the definitions found under section 2.4 in the present study served as further guidelines to decide whether an expression was an idiom, but the initial focus was put on the dictionaries as they could automatically tell whether an expression was idiomatic or not. Otherwise, the data could have been influenced by more subjectivity. When the backbone of the data had been collected in this manner, the main analysis of the data began. Simultaneously, general research on idioms was also conducted from the outset and continued throughout the study.

2. Background

The purpose of this section is to survey previous research made on The Secret History, how idioms are used in other novels and idioms in general. In addition, this section will also provide a brief overview of the definition and categorisation of idioms made by scholars.
2.1 Previous Research on *The Secret History*

First of all, there have been other studies on the novel of choice, but they have almost exclusively been concerned with other topics than its language, such as the themes it treats or the characters. For example, previous research conducted in Sweden include “Greek Gods in the Twilight Zone: Liminality in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*” (2005) and “Gray Haze and Luminous Light: Narrative Mode and Mood in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*” (2006), two conference papers by Katherina Dodou. Thus, not much research has actually been done on the language itself in the book.

In fact, only one previous study was found that focuses on its language. It was the MA thesis “Translating Idioms: A Case Study on Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* and its Finnish Translation” (2010), by Sanna Mustonen, which deals with different strategies for translating the original idioms from the English language that occur in the novel into Finnish. Mustonen (2010, p. 83) found that three different strategies were employed in this task. First, the most common method was to translate the idiom with a non-idiomatic expression. Thereafter came the method of translating the idiom with an idiomatic equivalent. Finally, the least common method was to do a verbatim translation of the idiom, which resulted in that the idiomaticity was lost in the translation.

2.2 Previous Research on Idioms in Fiction

Some similar studies have been carried out regarding idioms and figurative language based on other novels. They are often concerned with the process of translation at the same time, like the study mentioned above. The translation from the original language that the text was written in into another language seems to be a particularly frequent topic as well. A few previous studies are also focused on a particular genre of novels or a specific author's work. One example is *Idioms in Salman Rushdie's Novels: A Phraseo-Stylistic Approach* (Szpila, 2012).
2.3 Previous Research on Idioms in General

As previously stated, idiomatic expressions and other types of figurative language are important parts of language use and language learning. Crystal (1995, p. 421) claims that the use of different kinds of figurative language is found not only in literature, but also in a broad variation of fields such as advertising, journalism, politics and religion. He continues to argue that areas such as those all derived their use of figures of speech in some sense from classical rhetoric. Crystal also observes that figurative language cannot only be studied in different texts, but also in various sorts of everyday conversation. To sum up, idioms are common both in written and spoken language, as well as in both formal and informal contexts (Ambrose, n.d, p. 181).

Still, as pointed out by Mustonen (2010, p. 6), idioms have not often been studied in an extensive manner in comparison to other fields in linguistics and, hence, deserve their due attention. One plausible explanation for the fact that idiomatic expressions as a field of study is still fairly unexplored is, as mentioned earlier, that scholars have disagreed over what characteristics should be essential for idioms and, thus, exactly what kind of expressions that should be identified as idioms. For example, some features that have been debated are whether idioms must be made up of more than one word or if they need ambiguity in order to classify as idioms. Since idioms differ in their nature, such as for instance that they are more or less figurative and regarding their ability to be modified, it is probably fruitful to adhere to the view that idiomaticity is more a question of degrees of figurative versus literal language, rather than any distinct borders between the two types of language (Mustonen, 2010, pp. 29, 31-32, 34-35).

Previous research that involves the use of idiomatic expressions and figurative language includes various topics. For example, how idioms are used in teaching and why they are important for second language learners (Adkins, 1968; Ambrose, n.d); the effect that they have had on languages, such as the influence that idioms have had on the English language through the King James Bible (Crystal, 2012); the most frequent idioms as assessed through Corpus studies (Liu, 2003) and the treatment of idioms in dictionaries (Cowie, 1981).
2.4 Definition of Idioms

Scholars have tried to define and characterise idioms based on what features that make them unique. The following are some common terms that they often refer to when doing so (Mustonen, 2010, pp. 31-34): Compositeness accounts for that idioms are multi-words expressions that are made up of distinctive parts. Institutionalization/conventionality states that the expressions must be made conventional and well-known in order to count as idioms. Semantic opacity means that idioms have a figurative meaning that cannot be deduced by their individual words. Lexical fixity considers that idioms often cannot be much modified or that they can only occur with certain restrictions. Collocability relates to that words that are likely to occur together can be a frequent source of idioms. Semantic unity refers to that idioms function like units of meaning, which sometimes makes it possible to substitute them by as little as one word, in particular regarding phrasal verbs.

2.5 Categorisation of Idioms

Scholars have also tried to categorise idioms based on their form and content. For example, Glucksberg (2001, pp. 73-75) describes how four general groups of idioms can be identified “based on their degree of compositionality and semantic transparency” (p. 73): non-compositional, compositional opaque, compositional transparent and quasi-metaphorical (p. 75). Fernando (1996, pp. 35-36) provides another categorisation of idioms and mentions three different groups. Pure idioms have a purely figurative content. Semi-idioms have both figurative and literal parts in their content. Literal idioms have a more literal content as the individual words in the expressions have some semantic relation to the meaning of the expressions. Their idiomaticity lies in that they are either not able to be modified at all or only within restrictions. Phrasal verbs are another kind of idiomatic expressions. They are fixed phrases that combine verbs with either one of or both adverbs and prepositions, which also can be idiomatic and have a figurative meaning (Dictionary.com, 2014).
3. Results and Analysis

In this section, different aspects of the study are presented and analysed on their own under subsections. The content in these sections will move from a general nature to a more specific one. The first part describes the data that was used for the project. The following two parts deal with both research questions that were formulated as the aim of this project.

3.1 The Data

In the present study, 596 idiomatic expressions were found in the novel. This number is close to what Mustonen (2010, p. 51) found in her study of the same text, 625 expressions, although the data for the two studies differ in a few profound ways. Mustonen (2010) does not mention the total number of types that were found in her study as the data consists of a mixture of both types and tokens, but the study contains 125 examples of idiom and phrasal verb types that coincide in both studies, although the page numbers were the expressions are found in the novel do not correspond to each other. Those idioms were treated just like the rest of the expressions in this study and needed to be verified by dictionaries in order to be included in the data. Other than that, 471 idioms were found in the present study that are not mentioned in the previous study, except for two types that had been excluded from it and were included in this study instead due to the different focus of the studies. One type from the previous study was also excluded from the present study since it could not even be found in the book, which could be a result of differing editions.

First of all, several tokens of the same idiom type were counted as one entry in the present data since that made it easier to see how many different idiomatic expression types that are used in the novel. Also, only one textual example per idiom was noted in the data. This choice both includes expressions that are used identically on more than one occasion and expressions that have been slightly modified from one occasion to the next. In contrast, Mustonen's (2010, p. 52) study let multiple tokens of the same idiom type be counted as entries of their own in the data. The reason for Mustonen's choice is due to the aim of that study, which is the translation of idioms, since those
expressions were sometimes translated with different methods and therefore needed to be treated as separate entities.

Secondly, the present data consists of expressions with varying degrees of figurativeness since it might better give an idea of the wide range of idiomaticity and also, just how common idioms are in everyday communication. As a result, the data spans from highly idiomatic expressions to more transparent ones as well. Mustonen's (2010, p. 52) study focuses more on highly idiomatic expressions as they may be more interesting to analyse from the point of view of translation. Some of the most common, transparent expressions were thus excluded from that study. Of the 625 idiomatic expressions that Mustonen (2010, pp. 51-52) found in her study, 475 were described as pure idioms or semi-idioms, which makes for 76 per cent.

The present data also includes both idioms and idiomatic phrasal verbs, but any distinction between the two groups was not made in this study since they function very much alike and it was not believed to have affected the results in any substantial way. The only condition that the phrasal verbs had to fulfil was to carry somewhat figurative content. In Mustonen's (2010, p. 52) study, 150 phrasal verbs account for the remaining 24 per cent of the data and were discussed independently.

One feature that both studies have in common, however, is that they have included expressions that have been slightly modified or extended from the original form of an idiom. For example, an expression was sometimes changed to be used in a new context. For the present data, it was done provided that the figurative quality of the expression still seemed more or less intact.

The edition of the novel that the data refers to is the paperback version printed by Penguin Books in 1993, which is 629 pages. The results of the study indicate that one can draw the conclusion that, in average, there is almost one idiom for every page in the book. In the following sections, examples of how idioms are used in the novel are introduced and further analysed. The page numbers from the novel where the expressions are found are provided in brackets. It should also be said that any emphasis on the chosen expressions indicated by bold type was made purely for the purpose of the study and was not there originally.
3.2 Use of Idiomatic Expressions in *The Secret History*

3.2.1 Contexts

To begin with, the data gives the impression that the contexts the idioms occur in are quite diverse, which is in accordance with the claim that idioms are common in languages. When broken down, however, they often seem to be found in the novel about the characters. For instance, when describing character traits of a person such as (1) *you're as light as a feather* (p. 108), a person's feelings such as (2) *driving me crazy* (p. 216) and a person's actions such as (3) *he's had to shoulder more than his share of the burden* (p. 501). Other situations when the characters are not in focus include expressions such as (4) *beside the point* (p. 629), for example.

Table 1 illustrates this diversity and shows the distribution between two rough categories that were based on the areas mentioned above. For example, the first three expressions (1-3) were placed under the first category and the last one (4) was placed under the second category.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of context</th>
<th>Quantity (pcs)</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Character-oriented</td>
<td>527</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situation-oriented</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>596</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 shows how the idioms that were character-oriented far exceeded those that were more situation-oriented. It is understandable since most of the events that take place in the novel directly concern the characters in one way or another. Exceptions are found for example when the setting is described or regarding something that happens in the background of the plot.
3.2.2 Dialogue and Narration

The data also made it clear that there are many idioms both in the dialogue and the narration of the novel. On some pages one or the other sort could take over, depending on whether there is much dialogue or narration in that particular page or not. All in all, the idioms seem to be distributed fairly equally in the dialogue and the narration. The data indicates that the narration might still have a slightly higher number of idioms, but the narration in the novel may also cover a somewhat higher percentage of the text than the dialogue overall. However, the dialogue could still have more idioms relatively speaking. This idea was not possible to confirm in this study as the data only contains one textual example per expression, but an example of how the idioms are distributed in the book are shown in table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of text</th>
<th>Quantity (pcs)</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dialogue</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narration</td>
<td>303</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>596</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 suggests that there is only a marginal difference between the number of idioms that occurred in the dialogue and the narration of the novel, based on one textual example per expression. As another example, a page that contained several idioms and that had both dialogue and narration was also picked at random. Of the four idioms in total, two of them were in the dialogue, (5) *shake you down pretty good* (p. 26) and (6) *keep an eye on them* (p. 26). The remaining two, (7) *my heart skipped a beat* (p. 26) and (8) *lying on my feet* (p. 26), were found in the narration.

The data also seems to indicate that the distribution of the idioms as occurring in either the dialogue or the narration was purely coincidental and they could have been used interchangeably.
Some expressions may traditionally be thought of as more suitable in either speech or writing and in formal or informal language, however.

3.2.3 Other Examples

In a few cases, the same sentence could even contain several idioms, which were made to blend together. Some examples regarding this finding are shown below.

(9) round them all up and burn them at the stake (p. 59)

(10) on the brink of taking wing (p. 185)

For instance, this merging of expressions can be seen in the second example (10) that is made up of the idioms on the brink of and take wing. The former means something that is likely to occur soon and the latter has the meaning of that something makes progress (The Free Dictionary, 2014). Therefore, the expression can be interpreted as something that is going to succeed in the near future.

It was also noticed how the form of idioms was sometimes modified or extended by the author into new expressions (Mustonen, 2010, pp. 52-53). This process is described by Glucksberg (2001, p. 77) as variants based on familiar idioms. The following are some examples of expressions from the text.

(11) a tiny splinter of truth (p. 59)

(12) take nobody for an answer (p. 59)

The first expression (11) could be a variant of the idiom a grain of truth. The second expression (12) seems to have taken on the figurative meaning of the idiom take no for an answer, which means that someone will not take a refusal and keeps doing something (Dictionary.com, 2014). Here, the word no is exchanged for the pronoun/noun nobody, but the meaning of the expression
still seems rather intact. The only thing that has changed is that someone refuses to take the answer
*nobody* and persists to hear something else.

The novel contains a high amount of idioms with figurative use of body parts or bodily functions
such as (13) *cutting my own throat* (p. 8) and (14) *talk you into* (p. 35), as suggested by Mustonen
(2010, p. 64). Idioms with figurative use of animals are also well represented, such as (15) *track a
wildebeest or something* (p. 62) and (16) *bats in the belfry* (p. 275). Moreover, it was noticed how
the expressions could be divided into several other subcategories as well, of which two of them are
shown below.

(17) **year-round** (p. 5)  (21) **in your neck of the woods** (p. 52)
(18) **cutting him short** (p. 256)  (22) **three sheets to the wind** (p. 55)
(19) **by and large** (p. 285)  (23) **treacherous waters** (p. 58)
(20) **by a long shot** (p. 391)  (24) **the salt of the earth** (p. 320)

The first four expressions (17-20) make figurative use of different kinds of measurements and
the following four expressions (21-24) do the same regarding various things in nature. These
examples suggest that the novel contains idioms that make figurative use of a range of areas, which
are often surprisingly ordinary. For example, a few other areas are such as regarding clothes,
colours, geography and food.
3.3 Effects of Idiomatic Expressions in *The Secret History*

3.3.1 Language

The role that idioms have in languages can be seen as they have the ability to convey information in a condensed, colourful manner. Furthermore, idioms are claimed to be understood faster than their literal counterparts since they are retrieved from memory largely in the same way as single words. Also, while idioms might require some linguistic processing in order to be recognised, they do not need them to the extent that literal expressions do (Glucksberg, 2001, pp. 76-77).

First of all, idioms make it possible for relatively long utterances to be shortened to just a phrase and still cover the same meaning. They can thus be an economical and more straightforward way of communication. Even though some idioms are made up of no more than two words, they can still express much meaning in those few words. Below are some of the two-word idioms that were found in the novel to illustrate this point.

(25) *come clean* (p. 393)

(26) *at heart* (p. 548)

(27) *drift apart* (p. 614)

The meaning of the first expression (25) is to tell someone the truth about something. The second expression (26) means the basic nature of someone/something or what they care about most. The third expression (27) has the figurative meaning of to stop having contact with someone (The Free Dictionary, 2014).

Idioms also provide diversity and nuances to languages as the same basic idea can be expressed in more than one way. This richness of expression in a language makes it possible for the figurative picture the idioms present to be beneficial for the understanding of a specific idea or situation. This point is shown below where some of the idioms are listed in groups based on the figurative meaning they are all expressing.
The first five expressions (28-32) are examples of idioms that express aspects of the notion of fear. For example, one expression (28) describes how someone can tense up when they are frightened. The following five expressions (33-37) do the same with the concept of anger and the last four expressions (38-41) use the idea of to disappear. Two expressions from the same category may closely resemble each other, but they are still not exactly the same and might sometimes be used in different contexts. For example, in the last category, the first expression (38) can also be used as imperative (The Free Dictionary, 2014), while the rest of the expressions might seem more like statements.

The idioms may also serve as indicators of the contemporaneity of a text as they can have an influence on whether the reader experiences it as up-to-date or if it feels outdated. On the one hand, if there are many expressions in the text that are no longer common in use, the language is probably going to be experienced as more archaic. On the other hand, if there are many recently coined expressions in the text, the language is also probably going to be experienced as more modern. Perhaps, this point is even more evident when it comes to the characters' dialogue rather than the narration as it might be less explicit.
For example, one expression that is often claimed to have fallen out of daily use by native speakers is the previously mentioned idiom *raining cats and dogs* (The Free Dictionary, 2014). This particular expression was not found in the book, but it would not have not have been surprising if at least one similar case could have occurred given the high frequency of idioms in the novel. One expression that was found, however, was the idiom (42) *pouring rain* (p. 458) that could represent a more current way of expressing the same meaning as the former expression.

### 3.3.2 Characters and Setting

Idiomatic expressions have the potential to affect the reading of a novel in other ways as well. What specific idioms that were chosen to incorporate in the text might reveal things about it that the reader might not otherwise think about so much. The examples below show how the expressions can give clues about the characters background and make references to the setting of the text.

(43) *a white-shoe banking firm* (p. 17)  \(\rightarrow\) (46) *any Vermonter worth his salt* (p. 195)

(44) *well off* (p. 142)

(45) *such bluebloods* (p. 218)

First, the idioms can be used to indicate different things about the characters' background, such as what geographical area they are from, what profession they have and if they are rich or poor. For example, three expressions (43-45) were found in the novel that might hint at a character's background and suggest an upper class lifestyle, as shown above (The Free Dictionary, 2014).

The idioms can also be used to strengthen the references to the geographical setting of the text. In the novel, one particular case was noted in one of the expressions (46) above. This idiom can be used to show that someone or something deserves one's payment, praise or respect (Dictionary.com, 2014). References such as this can strengthen the ties to the setting as the novel is set in a fictional town called Hampden in Vermont, United States.
4. Discussion

The aim of this study was to observe the way that idiomatic expressions can be used in fiction and what effects this usage can have on the reading of fiction. The empirical part of the study was to examine the novel *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt for these particular questions, from the perspective of a second language learner.

The present study was able to find nearly 600 different idioms in the novel, the exact number being 596. Although it is a rather high number, the total number of idiomatic expression tokens in the novel is probably far higher since the data only included types for every idiom and let multiple use of the same idiom be counted under the same entry in the data. Furthermore, there were some difficulties in the collection of the data, which will be dealt with later, that lead to that some idioms were probably left undiscovered. However, the data still managed to provide a representative overview of the number of idioms in the text. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that figuratively rich novels such as this one can be well suited for studies on idioms and other types of figurative language.

Different kinds of idioms were also represented as the data covered idioms with differing degrees of figurativeness. Both highly idiomatic expressions and more transparent ones were well represented in the data. Thus, it was possible to conclude that the two types were used frequently in the novel, but the amount of more ordinary, transparent expressions in the text was quite surprising.

The study has shown that idioms can be used for several different purposes in a text. To begin with, section 3.2.1 argued that they can be used for contexts relating to both characters and other situations, such as the description of the setting. The former category contained a much higher number of idioms than the latter category, which can be explained by the fact that most of the plot in the novel is focused on the characters and it only occasionally shifts focus to other areas such as that of the setting.

Section 3.2.2 showed that idioms can be used successfully both in the dialogue and narration of a text. In the novel there was only a minor difference between the number of idioms that occurred in
the two types of text, based on one token per expression type. The narration was believed to have contained more idioms than the dialogue, as the former was also believed to cover somewhat more of the text than the latter in general, but it was not reflected in the findings to any great extent. The dialogue might also contain more idioms if it had been compared to the narration, relatively speaking. However, it was not possible to confirm this in the present study, but if every idiom in the text had been found and the data had included several tokens of the same idiom type, the figures presented in the study might have been very different.

Moreover, the study showed in section 3.2.3 that idioms can be used together with each other and be extended or modified to create variant expressions. Thus, it was noticed that as opposed to what definitions of idioms can claim (Crystal, 1995, p. 163), idioms may sometimes allow for internal change and still be understood, even though they are described as fixed expressions. A similar point can be made about more transparent expressions since they may sometimes be understood by their individual words, which is also in contrast to some definitions of idioms. This section also included a passage about what different areas the idioms made figurative use of and it was shown that these were often surprisingly commonplace, such as relating to animals or nature.

The results of the study indicate that the use of idioms, or other kinds of figurative language, can have many potential benefits when they are used in fiction. For example, section 3.3.1 showed that idioms can carry much meaning in few words and that they can make language more multifaceted than strictly using literal expressions. In addition, idioms can have an influence on whether the reader experiences the language as contemporary or not. They can also contribute to the reading experience, as it is reasonable to believe that they can add to the overall flow and dynamic of the text when it is read. Furthermore, idioms may also help to make fictionalised characters and place names to seem more real as they can reference the characters background or the geographical setting of the text, as shown in section 3.3.2. However, perhaps features such as those mentioned above cannot be claimed to be unique to idioms since they could probably be applied to non-
idiomatic expressions as well, which could be seen as an argument against that idioms have any entirely unique features after all.

No particular patterns was found for the idioms that different characters used in the novel, but it still seemed plausible that they could have occurred. For example, the use of idioms might be a clever way to establish differences among characters, such as those among different age groups and so on. If an older character uses more dated expressions than the younger characters, and the other way around, it would probably only strengthen their age differences. It could also be used in reverse for yet another effect. The idioms might also be used in order to showcase other differences among specific characters, such as regarding their personality. For example, a serious person may sometimes use more sincere expressions than a less serious person.

The hypothesis for the study was that fiction could prove a fruitful ground for achieving knowledge about idioms and how they are used, which could benefit a person's general language use. While it might be true for both native speakers and foreign learners, this study focused on the topic from a second language learner's point of view since the correct use of idioms can be a critical step toward fluency in a language. It can be seen as people may seem more native-like if they learn something about a target language's set of idiomatic expressions as it naturally implies a certain understanding of the culture and traditions where that language is used as well (Ambrose, n.d, p. 180; Glucksberg, 2001, p. 88).

This hypothesis was partially verified by the study as it showed how fiction can be a source for understanding how idioms function and that this knowledge seems positive, but it was not possible to conclude much else by the data from a foreign learner's point aside from some general reflections on why idioms can be difficult for them to recognise in a text, which are described below.

Idioms can be tricky to recognize for foreign learners since it often lies in their very nature to be specific to that language. This is not always the case, however, as shown for instance in idioms that derived from Bible translations and Aesop's fables, which may suggest otherwise. Still, it can be a difficult task for a second language learner to pinpoint idioms and also, to know how to use them
correctly (Adkins, 1968, p. 148; Glucksberg, 2001, p. 86). This fact is true regardless if the idioms occur in spoken or written language. One reason is that the figurative meaning behind an expression often can be vastly different from its literal meaning. Besides, exactly what characteristics that constitute an idiom are not yet fully established. Of course, this is also the case when trying to pick out idioms in a text and it should be remembered by the learner. In my own experience, this difficulty can establish itself in different ways.

To begin with, a foreign speaker cannot always depend on the ability to avoid problems by using their mother tongue as there is not always an idiomatic equivalent in that language that can be used to make sense of the expressions, and since idioms rarely survive a literal translation from one language to another (Glucksberg, 2001, p. 87). Sometimes, however, that is the case and those kinds of idioms would probably be easier to learn and understand for a second language learner. For example, the English idiom (47) *at all costs* (p. 5) that is found in the novel has an almost verbatim equivalent in Swedish *till varje pris*. Both of those expressions convey the same implied meaning that something must be done no matter what (The Free Dictionary, 2014). When the case is not so clear-cut, the learner must simply try to memorise those expressions by heart and know when it is appropriate to use them (Glucksberg, 2001, p. 86). Therefore, it is not enough to know the meaning behind idioms, but the learner must also learn to assign them to the right context (Ambrose, n.d, p. 182).

Some expressions may not be recognized as idioms, even in plain sight or when the learner is informed that they in fact are idioms. One reason for this problem can be that what they might have in common is that the learner has difficulties with decoding the literal meaning of the expressions as well. If the learner knows the literal meaning behind an expression, the chance to be able to work out the implied meaning also increases (Glucksberg, 2001, p. 87), even if they are not often related to each other in the strictest sense. As a foreign speaker, you might simply dismiss difficult expressions and phrases as something that you do not understand and not reflect on the possibility that they could be idioms. As an example, a background check was done on the expression (48) *hem*
and haw (p. 96) that was listed in Mustonen's study (2010, p. 59), before its meaning was
understood. The idiomatic meaning of the expression is that someone is hesitating instead of being
straightforward, while the literal meaning of the words can be to resemble sounds of hesitation that
are made while speaking (Dictionary.com, 2014).

Some of the expressions are also very frequent in common use and this might make it
troublesome for the learner to recognize them as idioms. The learner might then interpret them like
any other vocabulary item in the text. It is bound to result in that it is very likely that some idioms
will pass by unnoticed when the text is read, no matter how thorough the learner is. Neither this
study nor Mustonen's (2010, pp. 85-86) study before it has probably been able to identify each and
every idiom in the text, but the results of the studies can still be representative. For example, idioms
such as (49) make much difference (p. 215) and (50) make sense (p. 524) are both very
commonplace and they were even excluded from Mustonen's (2010, p. 52) study for that reason. As
Mustonen (2010, p. 52) puts forward, a link can also be seen between that the most ordinary
expressions are often more transparent and as such, should not pose any particular problems to be
understood even for foreign learners (Glucksberg, 2001, p. 87).

Another problem can be found in that when the learner is reading a text, perhaps even more so if
it is a work of fiction, it can be difficult to stay on track and focus on the language, instead of being
drawn into the plot. For the present study, the novel had been read a few times earlier, so it was
perhaps less of a problem in the data collection process as it was known beforehand what was going
to happen throughout the story. Still, the problem can make itself reminded once again for the
learner when the text is re-read. With this point in mind, it might sometimes be a good idea to revise
each page or chapter for maximum comprehension of language-related aspects, especially for
foreign learners.

It might also be difficult for the learner to separate the conventional idioms, which can be
verified by dictionaries and so on, from expressions that were created by the author. Mustonen
(2010, pp. 85-86) describes in her study how some passages looked like idioms on the surface, but
as they could not be verified by dictionaries, turned out to be figurative language that had sprung from the author's own imagination. Perhaps those expressions cannot be claimed to be “false” idioms altogether, but they cannot be described as entirely “true” idioms either as they are not shared by the speech community. For instance, the expression (51) * couldn't beat him away from the Greek with a stick (p. 58) could pass for an idiom at a first glance, but it seems not to be an established utterance. The figurative meaning of this particular expression may resemble that of wild horses could not drag me away from (The Free Dictionary, 2014).

The same thing can be said about other subcategories of figurative language since they can be difficult to separate from idioms and sometimes coincide with them as well. For example, the novel contains several passages that are not only idioms, but also metaphors or similes at the same time. For example, expressions such as (52) he's such a fruitcake (p. 494) is also a metaphor since it compares two things by implying that there is an identification between them, and (53) he was like a brick wall (p. 528) is also a simile as it explicitly compares two items by using words such as like or as (McArthur, 1998, p. 375). Of course, the book contains multiple metaphors and similes that are not established idioms as well. To link this point to the previous one, it seems like it might be particularly difficult to separate established idioms from non-established expressions regarding these kinds of figurative language, metaphors and similes, just because they may look very similar to each other, if not almost identical.

Finally, something else that became obvious through the study is that in spoken discourse, the learner has the option to rely on manners of speaking, or body language and mannerisms in order to understand utterances. In written discourse and when reading a text, there are no such options. This can be yet another reason for why it might be difficult to distinguish between figurative and literal language in a text, as the learner cannot depend on external factors such as those mentioned above. One advantage, however, as compared to spoken language is that when a text is read, the learner does not have to take into account problems such as if the speaker is speaking too fast or too low, but can adjust the pace of reading themselves. It can also prove beneficial to have the expression down
in writing when the learner is trying to comprehend its meaning. Thus, there are probably both positive and negative aspects to consider when dealing with idioms in texts compared to in speech.

While outside the reach of this study, it might be speculated that the use of idioms can come with its own possible side effects aside from its potential benefits. For example, idioms may sometimes tend to be thought of as clichés. They cannot be used in all contexts, either, as there are even some occasions where idioms and similar phrases are often advised against, such as when writing a job application. For one thing, there is a chance to be more original if a person's own words are used instead of idioms. Idioms can also create barriers to understanding in other cases than regarding native and non-native users. They can lead to misinterpretations even within the same language, which can be used in separate geographical areas, such as for example regarding British English and American English (Crystal, 1995, p. 310). The same can be said even within the same country as differing generations, interests and locations can create confusions as well.

One interesting thing about idioms, however, is as Glucksberg (2001, p. 89) argues, that they can be seen as to represent “both universal and culture-specific ways of thinking”. This idea holds true when considering that idioms often address rather fundamental things about human nature, positive as well as negative, but that each language has its own method, in most cases, to express those ideas.

To summarise, this study set out with the aims of investigating how idiomatic expressions can be used in fiction and what effects they may have on the reading of fiction as it examined Donna Tartt's novel *The Secret History* through close reading and textual analysis. The study has shown that fiction can provide knowledge about idioms and the role they have in languages. In doing so, the study has provided examples of how idioms are used in the book. It was shown that idioms can be used for different purposes in a text and that they can have an influence on the language in a text. Moreover, the study has given examples of why idioms can be difficult to understand as a second language learner and suggested that the only way to increase comprehension is to put oneself in
contact with the language, for example through fiction. The general use of idioms seems to have many benefits, but it can also come with certain boundaries.

What distinguishes this study from many other studies on idioms in fiction was the focus on their role in a particular language and not how they translate from one language into another. Further research that this study has opened up would be how idioms are used in other kinds of media, such as television and newspapers, or a comparative study of several different media. It would also be interesting to explore the connection between idioms, fiction and second language learning, which needs to be further elaborated.
References

Primary sources


Secondary sources


